

NOTEBOOKS

FAQ

Q What does Windows Mobility Center do and how do I find it?

A Mobility Center consists of a number of tiles, each of which lets you monitor and control important functions of your notebook. Standard tiles include wireless networking, external displays and battery, which shows the remaining charge and lets you select between preset power plans. Much of this information is available from the System Tray, but Mobility Center gathers it into a single, clear interface so that you can see it at a glance.

Mobility Center is included with Windows Vista Home Premium, Business and Ultimate editions, although it's not installed on desktop PCs by default. You can start it by pressing the Start key and X, or find it in the Control Panel.

Manufacturers can develop their own tiles for Mobility Center if their products have special features they want to support. It's perhaps not the most important new feature in Vista, but it's extremely useful when you need information about your notebook.

Seth Barton

Notebooks and video expert



seth@computersshopper.co.uk

ASUS W5FE

★★★★★

£1,305 inc VAT

Most of Windows Vista's new features are available to anyone with a powerful enough PC, but one requires some additional hardware. Windows SideShow enables your PC to use secondary displays and devices to access your data in new and interesting ways. You could have a small display on the front of your PC showing system information such as processor temperature, a screen on your Media Center remote control or even one built into the lid of a notebook, such as with Asus's W5FE.

This is the first SideShow-capable notebook available. It's largely identical to the W5F notebook reviewed in *Labs* on page 70, but its lid has a small 2.8in LCD set on the outside. Next to this is a joypad, three buttons and a power switch, all of which create a long, low bulge across the lid.

SideShow takes about 10 seconds to boot up. It displays the time and date, shows battery information and has an easy-to-navigate menu. Its functions are dictated by SideShow Gadgets, which can also be displayed in Windows Vista's Sidebar. You can use these to play music, read email and get local weather updates, all without turning on the notebook.

There's 1GB of memory for SideShow to store files, but synchronising music from your notebook is a hassle. You have to switch SideShow to sync mode before using Media Player 11's sync function, and you can't use SideShow during the transfer. SideShow can't access the internet directly, so it has to wake the notebook from sleep periodically to update its information. This way you get relatively up-to-date information without a constant



drain on the notebook's battery. We put the notebook to sleep and set SideShow to update its memory every 15 minutes. The notebook ran for 24 hours in this mode, so you'll get more than a working day's worth of updates before the battery fails, provided you have a mobile internet connection to receive email and updates in the first place. In future we're sure there'll be many Gadgets covering areas such as public transport timetables, market data and text messaging, but the current selection is rather limited.

A notebook equipped with SideShow may be useful for those who work on the move, but you really need a

3G data card to make the most of it. For mains-powered desktop use it's pointless, as Vista can wake from sleep almost instantly.

Otherwise, the W5FE is largely identical to the W5F, although it has a bigger hard disk and Windows Vista Business rather than XP Pro. It costs around £150 more, which is a lot given the limited number of SideShow Gadgets available. We're not convinced by SideShow on a notebook, but it's an interesting technology that could do well on a remote screen, so you can stream information from your PC.

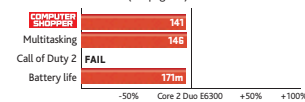
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Windows SideShow could be useful
- ✓ Good keyboard
- ✗ Expensive

NOTEBOOK PC 1.83GHz Intel Core Duo T5600, 1GB RAM, 160GB hard disk, Intel GMA 950 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL drive, 12.1in LCD widescreen, 1.9kg
PART CODE W5FE-2P009E
SUPPLIER Laptops Direct 08701 670818
DETAILS www.asus.com

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



Also consider...

HP Pavilion dv9292eu

★★★★★

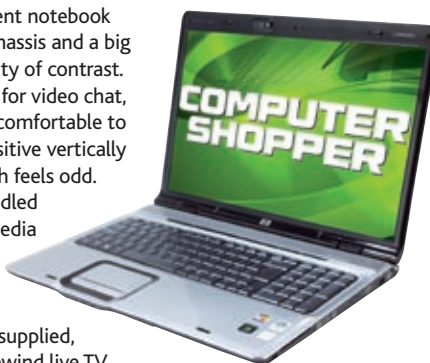
£848 inc VAT



This desktop-replacement notebook from HP has a stylish chassis and a big bright display with plenty of contrast. Above the display is a webcam for video chat, while the keyboard beneath is comfortable to use. The touch pad is more sensitive vertically than horizontally, though, which feels odd.

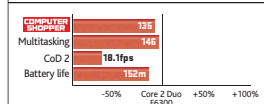
You can use one of two bundled remotes to control Windows Media Center (WMC). The larger one is clearly laid out and works brilliantly. An ExpressCard digital TV tuner is supplied, so you can record, pause and rewind live TV using the excellent WMC interface. There's even an HDMI output so you can connect the notebook to an HD TV.

With 2GB of RAM and a fast 2GHz processor, the notebook made short work of our benchmarks, and



PRICE CUT!

NOTEBOOK PC 2GHz AMD Turion 64 X2 TL-60, 2GB RAM, 160GB hard disk, Nvidia GeForce Go 7600 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL drive, 17in LCD widescreen, 3.6kg
SUPPLIER www.comet.co.uk
DETAILS www.hp.co.uk
PART CODE RW755EA
 ✓ Great display; decent 3D graphics ✗ Poor touch pad
FULL REVIEW Jun 2007



its graphics chipset will run the latest games smoothly. This notebook won our Best Buy award when it cost £944 including VAT, so it's even better value at Comet's current price.

ACER Aspire 5101AWLMi

★★★★★

£437 inc VAT



Most of the notebooks we've reviewed recently have dual-core processors, usually from Intel. However, Acer's affordable Aspire 5101AWLMi uses a single-core AMD processor. Single-core processors are still common in budget notebooks, and if you'll use your notebook only for tasks such as browsing the web, sending email and basic photo editing, you won't suffer from the lack of a second processing core.

This notebook has a fast 2GHz AMD Turion 64 MK-36 processor and 1GB of RAM. It scored 94 overall in *Shopper's* 2D benchmarks, and was particularly quick at memory-intensive tasks such as photo editing. This is a great score for a notebook at this price, but the Turion processor isn't as power-efficient as its Intel equivalent, so battery life was rather poor. The ATI Radeon Xpress 1100 graphics processor couldn't run our Call of Duty 2 test smoothly even at the lowest resolution and detail settings, but then you can't expect a gaming notebook at this price.

The Aspire 5101AWLMi comes with Windows Vista Home Premium rather than the Basic version. It includes Windows Mobility Center (see FAQ, opposite) and Windows Media Center, which makes browsing media files easy. Windows Media Center has an excellent electronic programme guide, which you can use if you add a USB TV tuner. The 120GB hard disk is a surprise at this price and provides plenty of space for storing large media files or an extensive music library.

To enjoy photos, video files and TV at their best, you need a decent display. The Aspire 5101AWLMi's 15.4in widescreen is bright, with a



high-contrast picture. Our demanding greyscale and colour wheel image tests didn't reveal any problems, so the screen is suitable for colour-sensitive work such as photo manipulation. There's a webcam above the screen and a microphone built into the chassis beside the keyboard, so you won't need to buy either to take part in video chat sessions. While the speakers sound OK for voice, you'll probably want to add some external ones when listening to music.

The keys don't give enough tactile feedback to show when you've pressed them, but they should be fine for anything but writing long documents. The

touch pad is wide and accurate, and there's a four-way scroll controller between the buttons for navigating around documents and folders.

The DVD writer and memory card reader support all the common formats. There are four USB2 ports for peripherals but no FireWire, so those with older digital camcorders may not be able to connect to this notebook.

If you don't want to play games or do anything else that's too processor-intensive, this is an excellent budget notebook for use around the home.

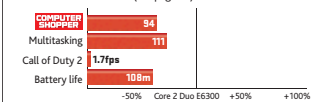
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fast for a budget notebook
- ✓ DVD writer and big hard disk
- ✗ Poor battery life

NOTEBOOK PC 2GHz AMD Turion 64 MK-36, 1GB RAM, 120GB hard disk, ATI Radeon Xpress 1100 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL drive, 15.4in LCD widescreen, 2.7kg
PART CODE LX.AX90X.017
SUPPLIER Laptops Direct 08701 670818
DETAILS www.acer.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



BYTE SIZE

BRENTHAVEN Fusion MB Black

★★★★

£38 inc VAT

This messenger bag won't look out of place in a business

meeting, but its style and shape make it more suitable for casual weekend use. It's made from very tough Cordura nylon, and has plenty of pockets and pouches on the outside. The carry handle is well padded, as is the removable shoulder strap. The notebook and its padding take up most of the space inside the bag, leaving enough room only for papers or a small file.

Basic foam padding protects the notebook from above and below, while the sides are padded and sprung to absorb impacts. A 15.4in notebook is a snug fit. This is a well-designed bag at a reasonable price, but it doesn't provide particularly impressive protection for your notebook.

Seth Barton



SUPPLIER www.microwarehouse.co.uk
DETAILS www.brenthaven.com

FUTIRO Solo

★★★★

£37 inc VAT



Futiro's Solo is the baby

brother of the Luna phone reviewed in *Shopper* April 2007. It's a small, USB-connected Skype phone that looks gorgeous. The 75cm cable wraps around the phone when not in use, making the Solo neat and easy to carry.

The front surface has cursor keys for selecting a contact, and buttons for initiating calls and hanging up, so you shouldn't need to use your keyboard. It's very comfortable to hold and sound quality is among the best we've heard from a Skype phone.

US Robotic's USB Internet Phone is better value and has a screen, but while the Solo is a little expensive, it has excellent sound quality and looks amazing.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER www.futiro.com
DETAILS www.futiro.com

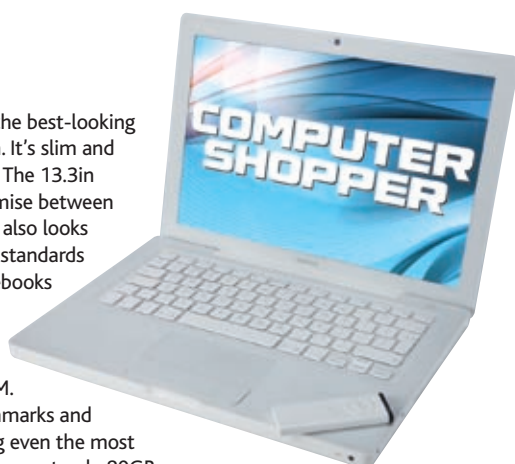
APPLE MacBook

★★★★★

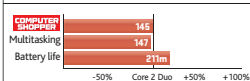
£879 inc VAT

The MacBook is possibly the best-looking notebook we've ever seen. It's slim and feels sturdily constructed. The 13.3in display is a good compromise between size and portability, but it also looks great: it's easily up to the standards of the best Windows notebooks we've tested.

Inside the system there is a fast dual-core processor and 1GB of RAM. It sped through our benchmarks and it is capable of performing even the most demanding of tasks. However, at only 80GB the hard disk is a little on the small side. The number and types of ports are also limited by the slender design; there are only two USB2 ports, for example, and there is no built-in modem, either.



NOTEBOOK PC 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7200, 1GB RAM, 80GB hard disk, Intel GMA 950 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 13.3in widescreen LCD 2.4kg
SUPPLIER www.apple.com/ukstore
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk
PART CODE MA700B/A
✓ Stylish chassis; great display
✗ Lacks many standard ports
FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



The touch pad is huge and accurate and the keyboard is generally good, but the Return key was a little too small for our liking. However, the MacBook has a long battery life, making it a great notebook for those wanting something both stylish and portable.

BYTE SIZE

GIGABYTE G-Pad GH- GBY11-NPS

★★★★

£18 inc VAT

Gigabyte's G-Pad is a folding aluminium mat for your notebook to stand on. This version can accommodate 14in or 15in notebooks, but a smaller version is also available.

The stand sits flat on the desk, raising your notebook by just over 5mm. Holes in the metal improve airflow under the notebook, while the aluminium helps to dissipate heat. Our test computer felt cooler when used on the stand.

As the notebook sits flat, the G-Pad does nothing to improve your comfort while you use it, so you might be better off with CoolerMaster's NotePal 5 for regular desktop use. You can use the G-Pad on your lap, though, so it's good for those on the move.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS www.gigabyte.com.tw

HIPER Clavier Aluminium Keyboard

★★★★

£21 inc VAT

Available in black or silver, Hiper's Clavier Aluminium keyboard feels as if it could take any amount of typing or gaming punishment. The keys have a positive click action, but they're stiffly sprung, which makes typing fairly tiring. The keyboard is compact, but the arrow keys are squashed in next to the numeric keypad. Short-cut buttons can launch your web browser or email client, change your PC's volume or control applications such as Windows Media Player, iTunes and WinAmp.

The Clavier Aluminium Keyboard isn't brilliant for typing, but it's beautifully made and very good value.

Chris Fimmare

SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS www.hipergroup.com



TOSHIBA

Satellite Pro A120SE-220

★★★★★

£516 inc VAT

We've seen the A120 chassis before, most recently in *What's New, Shopper* March 2007. It's available in many different guises, and this latest version has a different specification, a lower price and comes with Windows Vista Business installed.

Vista Business has a number of advantages for the business user over Vista Home Premium. It has Windows Fax and Scan for sending and receiving documents, and Remote Desktop Connection is very useful if you want to work from multiple PCs as it enables you to remote control your notebook from another PC. There is also PC imaging software to protect your data from loss through computing error or accident.

Toshiba has designed the A120 to resist a wide variety of accidents. An acceleration sensor protects the hard disk by parking its heads if it detects falling or vibration, thus saving your data if you drop the notebook. The keyboard is spill-resistant, which is useful if you drink coffee while you work, and the motherboard is designed so that delicate components are away from the chassis' more vulnerable corners.

The notebook's layout isn't perfect, though. Most of the ports, including all three USB2 ports, are on the rear, which makes them hard to reach when plugging in a USB drive or external mouse. There's also a D-sub output, a CardBus slot and an SD memory card reader, though, which should prove sufficient for the business user.

The screen's anti-glare coating makes it suitable for use outdoors and under office lighting. The keyboard feels good and the keys are very responsive, so typing is



comfortable. Anyone with very large fingers may find them a little small, though. The touch pad is accurate and has an unusual paper-like texture.

The battery lasted for almost three hours in our light-usage test, so you'll get most of an afternoon's worth of work out of it as long as you stick to office applications. Its Intel Core Duo T2600 processor is capable of dealing with far more demanding files than Word documents, but with only 512MB of RAM it was disappointing in our benchmarks. The spare memory slot means you could upgrade to 1GB for £25 or so.

The hard disk has a small 60GB capacity, and Vista

Business takes up 10GB of that.

Again, it's enough for office users but will quickly fill up if you start hoarding large media files. More disappointing is the CD-RW/DVD combo drive, which can read CDs and DVDs, but write only to CDs.

The A120 would benefit from more RAM and a DVD writer, both of which come with the cheaper Acer 5101AWLMi on page 17.

However, it has a dual-core processor and Vista Business. This, and features such as the hard disk protection, make it great value for business users on the move.

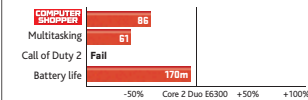
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Anti-glare display
- ✓ Damage-resistant design
- ✗ Small hard disk

NOTEBOOK PC 1.66GHz Intel Core Duo T2600, 512MB RAM, 60GB hard disk, Intel GMA 950 graphics, DVD/CD-RW combo drive, 15.4in LCD widescreen, 2.8kg
PART CODE PSAC1E-0J0021EN
SUPPLIER Laptops Direct 08701 670818
DETAILS www.toshiba.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



Also consider...

SONY

Vaio VGN-FE41E

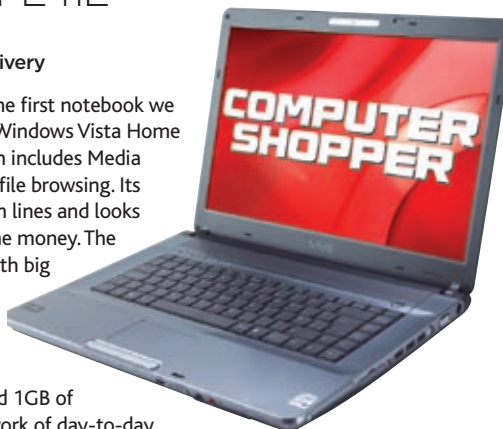
★★★★★

£774 inc VAT and delivery

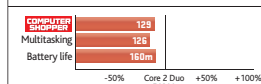


This Vaio was the first notebook we reviewed with Windows Vista Home Premium, which includes Media Center for easy media-file browsing. Its stylish chassis has clean lines and looks better than most for the money. The keyboard is unusual, with big flat keys, but they are well spaced and sensibly arranged.

Inside the case, a dual-core processor and 1GB of RAM will make short work of day-to-day tasks. There's a dedicated graphics chipset but it's not very fast, so you'll have to reduce detail levels to the minimum in modern games. There's a big 120GB hard disk on which to store all your files, and a wide range of quality pre-installed software for video and image editing.



NOTEBOOK PC 1.66GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5500, 1GB RAM, 120GB hard disk, Nvidia GeForce Go 7400 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 15.4in widescreen LCD 2.8kg
SUPPLIER www.technoworld.com
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk
PART CODE VGN-FE41E
✓ Good Windows performance; stylish; comprehensive software bundle FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



At 2.8kg the Vaio VGN-FE41E is portable, and the battery lasted for an acceptable two hours and 40 minutes. It's a good notebook with a welcome dash of style and an impressive software bundle, and all for a decent price.

BYTE SIZE

KENSINGTON Orbit Optical Trackball

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

The mouse is the most common pointing device for a PC, but they can be inconvenient if you don't have much space on your desk. Some people find them uncomfortable and can even suffer repetitive strain injuries from using them.

Kensington's Orbit Optical Trackball needs less space than a mouse, as it stays still while you move the ball with your fingers or the palm of your hand. This can reduce the strain on your hand and wrist. The Orbit doesn't have a scroll wheel, which could be a pain, and with a slower response than a good gaming mouse, it isn't suitable for fast-paced games. It's fine for turn-based games and regular computing, though, and is well made and good value.

Alan Lu

SUPPLIER www.morecomputers.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.kensington.com>



SONY SMU-C3 Optical Mouse

★★★

£20 inc VAT

Sony's SMU-C3 Optical Mouse is part of the company's new PC peripheral range. It connects through a USB cable that you can wind up and store in a compartment under the mouse. You can unwind only as much cable as you need, so your mouse can fit on to your desk perfectly without any unnecessary cable making it messy.

The SMU-C3 is very wide, and the left and right buttons are comfortable. The mouse is flat, though, so we didn't feel that our hand had much support. It has a scroll wheel but no browser control buttons. The SMU-C3 is responsive but there are better and more comfortable mice for the money.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER www.yesasia.com
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk



CHOOSING A... Notebook Computer

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

PROCESSOR: 1.6GHz Intel Celeron M 420
MEMORY: 512MB DDR
HARD DISK: 60GB
STORAGE: DVD rewriter
GRAPHICS: Integrated (shares system memory)
SCREEN: 15.4in widescreen 1,280x800 LCD
EXTRAS: Wireless networking
CONNECTORS: Three USB2, memory card reader
SOFTWARE: Windows Vista Home Premium
WEIGHT: 3kg
Recommended minimum in grey

1 The minimum specification of notebook we recommend, shown above in grey, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This is an average notebook that should cost around £600. It is not particularly powerful or, at 3kg, particularly portable.

2 Dual-core processors, such as Intel's Core 2 Duo range, can be much faster at many tough tasks. This is dependent on software support, but a lot of applications have now been optimised. Dual-core processors are widely available and often cost only a little more than their single-core equivalents.

3 Most notebooks come with 15.4in 1,280x800 widescreen displays, which are great for watching DVDs or TV. If you want a notebook for use around the home, especially for entertainment purposes, it's worth considering one with a larger 17in display. This will also have a higher native resolution of at least 1,440x900, giving you a bigger desktop. This makes it far easier to use complex applications, such as photo- or video-editing software.

4 A modem, 10/100 Ethernet port and wireless 802.11b/g networking (WiFi) should be fitted as standard, but there are also some other ports and connectors that you might want. FireWire (IEEE 1394) is common and useful for digital video enthusiasts. Bluetooth is handy for connecting to a mobile phone, but it's usually fitted only to more expensive business notebooks. Memory card readers are pretty much standard, but check that your camera or MP3 player's format is supported.

5 If portability is your main priority, look for notebooks with 12.1in displays.

Spending around £1,000 will get you an ultra-portable notebook that weighs under 2kg. Most of these notebooks are just as powerful as their larger counterparts, though some use slower, ultra-low voltage (ULV) processors to further increase battery life.

6 Some ultra-portables can attach to an optional docking station, which incorporates drives, ports and power, when you get home to your desk. It's the best of both worlds, but tends to be expensive. Others have separate DVD drives to help keep size and weight to a minimum.

7 If you're not swayed by ultra-portable chic, you can get a lot more for your money. Entertainment notebooks pile on the features but still keep the price under £1,200. You should expect a 17in widescreen display, hybrid TV tuner and a remote control.

8 There are features you can add to a notebook without increasing the weight or reducing battery life. A 120GB or 160GB hard disk will give you much more storage space, while 1GB of RAM will help you speed through tougher tasks. DVD rewriter drives are standard and will allow you to burn CDs and DVDs on your notebook.

9 Dedicated graphics let you play modern 3D games and are increasingly common on all but the cheapest or lightest notebooks. Look for an ATI Radeon Mobility X1600 or Nvidia GeForce Go 7600 chip as a minimum for getting smooth frame rates on the latest titles. Many notebooks use integrated graphics, which are fine for all other purposes, but use up system memory.

10 Once you're happy with your specification, start to shortlist some models you can afford. Check the weight, display size and battery life of each of them. If these are not acceptable, you need to reconsider your priorities and which features you really need.

